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largely those of distribution; the political problems are those growing out of an effort to harmonize our recent industrial changes with American political traditions and political theories.

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## THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS.

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SOMEWHERE in his interesting book, "Saint Augustine and his Age," Mr. McCabe remarks that in writing his *Confessions* Augustine was guilty of a "fore-shortening of the psychic perspective." By this he means to say that the theologian has read into the comparatively innocent deeds of his boyhood his later and sterner conceptions of human nature, and the result is a distortion of the actual facts. A process very similar to this may be traced in many of the modern interpretations of Christian ethics, where the moral ideal is interpreted in terms of the theoretical and formal elements of Greek or modern ethics, and a fundamental identity both as to form and content is assumed to exist between them. We are told that "the advance of Christianity upon Paganism does not consist in a 'reversal of all the moral values of Paganism,' in the absolute condemnation of its fundamental principles. It is the fulfillment rather than the negation of Pagan morality: there is an identity beneath all the difference; . . . an identity of essential spirit and point of view. Develop the deeper implications of Pagan morality and you have the Christian morality."<sup>1</sup>

This assumption of "an identity of essential spirit and

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<sup>1</sup> Seth, "On Certain Alleged Defects of Christian Morality," in the *Hibbert Journal*, VI, p. 116.

point of view" between the Christian and the Greek or modern ethics can only be made by means of a foreshortening of the historical if not of the psychic perspective. It ignores the social and national background of the Christian ideal and the subsequent advances in ethical thought. It has given rise to much of the hostile and unsympathetic criticism of Christian ethics in recent times and explains the difficulties experienced by modern expositors in bringing the paradoxical, almost anti-social, utterances of Jesus into harmony with modern thought.

One of the most attractive of the recent interpreters of Christian ethics recognizes a certain aloofness, a conscious detachment, on the part of Jesus from all social problems. He refuses to be a divider of property or to suggest remedies for existing political ills. He moves through the social issues "with a strange tranquility, not as one who is indifferent to them, but as one whose eye is fixed on an end in which these social problems will find their own solution."<sup>2</sup> The moral life has for Jesus but two poles, God and the individual, and when he does touch upon social problems, such utterances are rather the 'by-products' of his thought and never form an essential part of his message. This is a clear statement of a fact that must impress itself upon the mind of every unprejudiced reader of the Gospels.

But when the same writer finds in this very aloofness and otherworldliness of Christian ethics grounds upon which to base a claim for its universality and efficiency in the solution of social problems, it is a question whether he too is not guilty of a foreshortening of the historical perspective. For he presupposes that the lofty moral idealism of Christian ethics, with its transcendental conception of God and his kingdom, still recognizes the moral potentialities of man's social and political relations, and only appears to ignore them because it "is fixed on an end in which these social problems will find their own solu-

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<sup>2</sup> Peabody, "Jesus Christ and the Social Question," p. 78ff.

tion." Jesus "sees into life by seeing over it." Does this, however, not read into Christian ethics the results of a monistic ethical idealism which includes God and existing society in the same moral order and makes them subject to the same moral values? Does it not ignore such radical utterances as "My kingdom is not of this world," and the many passages in the Gospels which imply a reversal of existing moral values and the institution of an entirely different moral order? The underlying assumption here, and one hardly tenable, is that the attainment of the ideal was conceived of in the mind of Jesus as a gradual growth and development, the result, in part at least, of individual effort and implying that man's social and political relations have an inherent moral value of their own. Such an ideal was, on the whole, entirely foreign to the thought of late Judaism.

Perhaps the most successful of the recent contributions to the understanding of the early Christian ideals have been those that have sought to interpret them in terms of the prevailing moral and religious conceptions of the time. They have shown conclusively that, so far as form and language are concerned, the teachings of the Gospels are to a large extent colored by the eschatological ideas of late Judaism. The ideal of Christian ethics is not distinctly anti-social nor is it pathological, as the followers of Nietzsche and Feuerbach would have us believe, but it is otherworldly. For we can hardly deny that a fundamental contrast between the present and a future world runs throughout the teachings of Jesus. He expected with his age, that the world was facing a speedy dissolution which might come at any time, and perhaps within the present generation, that this would be effected by an exhibition of supernatural power involving the destruction of heaven and earth, that this would be followed by a blest and eternal order, in which sin and suffering and conflict, together with all the moral values they condition, would be done away forever and the trans-

centental values described by the phrase "the kingdom of God and his righteousness" would prevail. Hence the frequency of such statements as "My kingdom is not of this world," "Resist not evil," "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," etc. Hence the instructions as to love of enemies rather than friends, giving and lending, the avoidance of anxious care for the morrow, the rigorous teachings as to wealth and filial obligations, and the lack of any positive moral valuation of many social and political relations. These are not treated as entirely insignificant, but rather as occupying a position upon the periphery of the moral ideal which is essentially otherworldly.

It is customary to offset these otherworldly elements with sayings that are more worldly and social in tone, and such sayings are not lacking in the sources; but to explain the great mass of material of a distinctly eschatological nature by saying that it is paradoxical and extreme and does not form an essential part of the Christian ethics, is, to say the least, to do violence to our sources and open the way for every kind of arbitrary and subjective interpretation of their meaning. These otherworldly ideas show us most conclusively that Christian ethics, whatever other elements it may have contained, approached the problem of the moral ideal from the standpoint of contemporary Jewish thought, which held that the world had grown old and that nothing of permanent value could be produced by human effort. The world-weary tone of late Jewish thought is lacking, to be sure, but the ideal is still sought, not in this world, the fashion of which passeth away, but in another world of transcendental values. The demand is for a new birth, a new beginning, an entire break with the old order of things,—*"und so lang du das nicht hast, dieses Stirb und Werde, bist du nur ein trüber Gast auf der dunklen Erde."*

The comprehensive statement of the ideal is in the words "the kingdom of God and his righteousness." An

atmosphere of the supernatural surrounds this ideal as is evinced by the passages in which the casting out of devils, the healing of diseases, and other exhibitions of divine power are intimately associated with the coming of the kingdom. The righteousness of the kingdom describes the character of those who are fit to occupy a place in this transcendental sphere. The criterion of values is also transcendental since it is found in the nature of God. To be perfect is to be like him. Because of the surpassing nature of these qualities, they are not to be won by human effort, but are the result of divine grace and therefore conditioned upon the divine will. The injunction to 'seek' the kingdom does not refer so much to the possibility of attaining the ideal through individual effort as to the diligent cultivation of the frame of mind which will be most congenial to the coming kingdom. In fact, those who are perhaps inclined to push the eschatological elements to extremes affirm that the Sermon on the Mount was intended as a sort of *Interimsethik* or temporary injunctions to tide over the short period before the coming of the kingdom. It is insisted that its teachings as to meekness, non-resistance, service, the neglect of earthly cares, etc., were not intended to be the guiding principles of a permanent social order such as we have in modern society, but were essentially provisional and designed as a preparation for another existence. Since the attainment of the ideal must wait upon the intervention of supernatural power, the utmost man can do is to cultivate the frame of mind that will place him most completely in sympathy with this other life when it comes.

We may perhaps sum up the eschatological elements in Christian ethics as follows. The complete attainment of the moral ideal is made contingent upon the coming within the near future of a supernatural world-order in which perfection or likeness to God is to be guaranteed by the rule of God in each heart. Here the emphasis is to be placed upon the rule of God and not upon those

ruled. Nowhere is it expressly stated that the attainment of the ideal is dependent upon or is the outcome of social and political relations. Jesus does not say that the coming of the kingdom is mainly conditioned upon the active efforts of his followers. The fact that it was thought possible for the kingdom to come before the hurried preaching tour of the disciples through the cities of Judea was completed would seem to prove the opposite. The moral ideal is not thought of as a task each must fulfill, in part at least, through his own efforts. It is a hid treasure, a pearl of great price, a gift, never one's own creation. The reason for this is the radical difference between the moral values of actual life and those of the true or transcendental sphere. Socrates's magnificent picture of the laws of the other world continuing and completing the work of their brothers, the laws of this world, could hardly have found a place in the Christian ethics. For the world's work never coincided exactly with the service of God. The spheres did not overlap. On the other hand, the nature of the moral ideal demanded that they should be kept as far apart as possible. "Render therefore unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's and unto God the things that are God's." It is very much to be doubted whether Jesus ever conceived of the great principle of evolution except as illustrated in the simple facts of nature around him, and certainly to attribute to him a philosophy of history embracing generations and ages of growth and development and having as an ultimate goal the highest moral and spiritual elevation of the race is to bring in a notion entirely foreign to the Jewish mind. Furthermore, it introduces a strange and inexcusable contradiction into Jesus's language, for it makes him describe the attainment of the ideal now as dependent upon an event that is imminent, catastrophic, and supernatural in character, and then again as a process initiated in society, furthered by man's efforts and standing in organic relation to this world.

In the light of these conclusions we are able to state

the problem of Christian ethics. If the Christian ideal was expressed in the terminology of the Jewish apocalyptic ideas of the time, a fact that can hardly be denied without doing violence to the records, and if it contemplated nothing beyond the horizon of these ideas, then it must be national in character and without any claims to universal validity. If the teachings of Jesus were spoken with the firm conviction that a few more years, or at most a generation, would witness the utter destruction of heaven and earth, followed by a palingenesis in which the existing moral order would be abolished, how can we take these sayings in their original setting and with their original meanings and apply them with confidence to the problems of modern life? Or have we the right to select such utterances as seem to lend themselves to a social and worldly ethic on the ground that they give us the essence of the Christian ideal, and ignore the eschatological elements which are also present and must condition every interpretation of the Christian world-view? Is it not true, as a matter of fact, that in applying Christian ethics to our modern problems we must universalize and change it so that its original meaning and intent are largely lost?

Luthardt, the Leipzig theologian and writer on Christian ethics, seems to have felt the force of this difficulty so strongly that he confessed any attempt to maintain a social order on earth in the original sense of the Christian ideal would be the "proclamation of absolute anarchy."<sup>3</sup> The worldly ethics insists that the moral life is a struggle, "ein Kampf ums Recht." The welfare of the entire social order depends upon the readiness of the individual to defend his rights and those of others. The refusal of one man to defend his rights may not affect the final issue, for he profits by the courage of the others. But were all to follow his example the results would be disastrous. In the traveling Englishman

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<sup>3</sup> Luthardt, "Vorträge über die Moral des Christentums," p. 136.



who resists the extortionate demands of landlord or cab-driver, von Ihering saw the explanation of the moral strength and greatness of English civilization.<sup>4</sup> How, then, is such an ideal which insists upon a healthful amount of self-assertion to be reconciled with an ethics demanding complete self-abnegation? Do not such expressions as "Resist not evil," "Take no thought for the morrow" and the command to seek an ideal that is essentially otherworldly imply a complete reversal of existing moral values? In fine, if the alternative forced upon us by Christian ethics is a choice between a stern and lofty idealism which insists that we set our affections entirely upon the things that are above, that we cultivate homesickness for an eternal city, and pray "let thy kingdom come," "let this world pass away," and a moral ideal that gives to all the rich and varied moral potentialities of life their proper place and approaches the moral problem from the standpoint of the actual rather than the transcendental,—if this is the alternative, I think few would hesitate in their choice.

That such an alternative is suggested by the language of the Gospels cannot be denied. It became more and more pronounced until the ethical ideals of the early centuries of Christianity were almost entirely dominated by the eschatological point of view. This could hardly have been possible did the idea not find some support in the early Christian sources. It is then a fact all the more worthy of remark, that this dualism between the worldly and the otherworldly does not seem to have existed in the thought and life of the author of the Christian ethics. It seems paradoxical that one who in his teachings placed the ideal in a world of transcendental values should still recognize by both word and deed the moral worth and dignity of this life. Such is, however, the case, and in spite of the rigor with which Jesus insisted upon the supremacy of his otherworldly ethics, we

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<sup>4</sup> Von Ihering, "Der Kampf ums Recht," p. 45.

find him mingling freely with men in their social relations, emphasizing the immediate and intrinsic moral value of the good act, and cherishing a poetic delight in the beauties of nature. He is lacking in many of the hall-marks of the genuine ascetic, and his belief in the doom threatening the world did not rob him of an unmistakable joy in life. The strongest evidence of this fact is found in the criticisms of his enemies who saw in him the "glutton," the "wine-bibber," the "friend of publicans and sinners."

The problem of Christian ethics is concerned then not so much with the statement of a world-view as with the interpretation of a life. If the paradox in the Christian ideal is to be explained at all, such an explanation must be sought in the life and personality of its author. What that life was in its essence, we shall probably never know, owing in part to the fragmentary nature of our sources and in part to the mystery that is always associated with genius. Says a recent writer: "Just as the facts of life, of artistic inspiration, or of the indomitable energy of great statesmen and nations present to the scientist, the art critic, and the historian ultimate data which they can explain no further, but must simply accept, so the student of religion, when face to face with this unique religious consciousness, must acknowledge it as an ultimate fact which he may not further analyze nor understand, which he may in some imperfect way sympathize with but cannot master nor explain away."<sup>5</sup>

The mystery and the greatness of this personality appear in such language as "I and my Father are one," "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Father save the Son." Such words must be the purest effrontery or they must presuppose a depth of religious and moral nature of the profoundest character. They imply that in the religious experience of Jesus the world of transcendental values described as

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<sup>5</sup> J. Weiss, "Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes," S. 176.

“the kingdom of God and his righteousness” was felt to be realized in his own life. The greatest achievement of late Jewish thought was its conception of God. But the loftiness and intensely otherworldly nature of this conception made it the despair of Jewish piety. The power was lacking to vitalize it and make it a real force in morals and religion. The tremendous significance of Jesus as a moral and religious genius lies in the fact that he made this transcendental idea dynamic in life and conduct. Faith in a divine Father was for him more than an intellectual matter. It was an abiding consciousness of oneness in spirit and purpose, a conviction of complete sympathy with the divine mind, of kinship in character and will. That a life could be lived in such an atmosphere is to us inexplicable, and the consciousness that his inner religious experience differed so widely from that of the ordinary man was doubtless the psychological foundation for the unique claims Jesus made for himself. We may seek to find parallels to this unique religious experience in the pneumatic phenomena of late Judaism and early Christianity, or we may try to account for it in terms of feeling, which, we are told, underlies all life and lends it its ultimate significance; but we can hardly explain it away.

“Every great man, every genuine man,” we are told, “is by the nature of him a son of Order, not of Disorder.” Jesus is no exception to Carlyle’s dictum. It is true that he clothed his ideas in the language of the time, but the problems of late Jewish thought found their solutions unconsciously in the inner harmony of his own religious experience. The stern dualism between the ideal and the actual, the otherworldly and the worldly, which crushed the life out of Jewish morality, did not exist for him. He made use of the eschatological expressions of the time in describing the ideal, while he showed, both by word and deed, that the ideal he preached was a reality in his own life. The beauty and poise of Jesus’s nature, which we can feel better than we can describe

or analyze, were due to this happy union of the ideal with the actual. Even the hard, almost ascetic utterances, which admit of no exceptions, do not offend because we feel them to be the natural expressions of a soul entirely at one with itself.

In the same way, the surpassing idealism of the Christian ethic finds its ultimate explanation in the religious experience of Jesus. For a soul at one with itself must find expression in a world-view that has no contradictions. This we find to be the case with Jesus. God and the sphere of values He represented were supreme for him and they contained no dualisms, and admitted no antinomies. "Never, in the life of a human being, has God been so real as here. So far as we can see, religion was the whole of life for him. In all his words, he directs his own soul and those of his hearers to God. In every stage of life, even the severest, he escapes to God and harkens to His voice. Every joy becomes a thanksgiving, every calamity a surrender to God's will. His whole nature is ever intent upon the highest and the ultimate. There is no relaxation, no trifling, no busying of oneself with things of subordinate interest."<sup>6</sup> It is in the light of this ideal and unified world of absolute values with its two phases, God as the loving Father and God as the Judge, that we are to interpret the lofty idealism of such utterances as those found in the Sermon on the Mount. It explains for us the surprising reversals of existing values. For example, it enables us to understand why the work and effort necessary in the provision of food and raiment have no intrinsic moral value of their own. To one who seeks first the true values, "the kingdom of God and His righteousness," these things will come as naturally as food and shelter come to the birds of the air or moisture and sunshine to the lilies of the field. They are 'added' and have no place in the ideal. We are to give alms or love our enemies independently of

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<sup>6</sup> Bousset, "Jesu," p. 47.

consequences just as God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall upon the just and unjust alike. He gives us the measure of values. These values are phrased in superlative, even transcendental, terms and the vast sweep of spiritual vision tends to make us lose the proper perspective in our estimate of personal rights, property, family and political relations. As the painter attains the proper proportions in his picture through the careful manipulation of the objects in the foreground, so we approach the problem of the formulation of ultimate moral values in terms of the immediate relations with which social justice deals.

Jesus's inner harmony of soul to which we have alluded saved him from the danger of the distortion of the moral perspective which is always present in such an ethic of superlatives. His superb moral balance enabled him to rise above the implications of the terminology in which he cast his teachings, and in this universality and catholicity of his nature is to be found the secret of his eternal appeal to the hearts of men. But it was inevitable that his followers, men cast for the most part in a far less heroic mould, would become keenly aware of the great gap between the ideal and the actual latent in Christian ethics. Hence they came more and more to renounce all attempts to attain the ideal by their own unaided efforts and to seek assistance from other sources. This naturally took the form of faith in Jesus himself where faith at first meant little more than the attempt, through sympathetic study and imitation of the life of Jesus, to induce the lofty religious and moral atmosphere which would make the attainment of the ideal possible. As the early enthusiasm waned, this degenerated into the artificial faith-ethic of theology. Ethics itself became the handmaiden of theology, while the ethical dualism still persisted.

The ethics of Jesus is the final working out of the logical implications of the ancient Hebrew theocracy. As the social and political setting in which Jewish moral ideas first took shape disappeared or lost its significance

with dispersion and captivity, men were forced to fall back upon a more subtle and spiritual bond, and hence the prevailing otherworldly and eschatological nature of late Jewish thought. The Jewish genius by virtue of oppression and denationalisation was thus forced to find citizenship in a kingdom of universal and therefore indestructible moral and spiritual values. Hence the inevitable blending of the moral and spiritual so that we have in the ethics of Jesus something like a final statement of the moral ideal in terms of religion. The ethics of Jesus belongs therefore to the overlapping things of human life. Its magnificent onesidedness is a challenge to the critical spirit as well as a pitfall to the moral or religious enthusiast. It presupposes a thoroughly religious nature and where this is lacking its appeal will be scarcely understood. Its weakness perhaps lies not in ignoring but in failing to emphasize the moral value of the immediate social situation. The modern no longer lives in a world of thought that reckons upon the imminent and catastrophic close of the present world-order and the introduction of another in which existing moral values shall be entirely reversed. The progress of civilization has taught us more and more to stress the moral importance of life's daily tasks. The line once sharply drawn between the supersensuous sphere of eternal values and this earthly life is becoming ever fainter and harder to trace, and the conviction grows upon us that out of the dirt and sweat of this work-a-day world may arise after all "a god though in the germ."

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